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The Copper Scroll

Joan E. Taylor

The mysteries of the Copper Scroll from Dead Sea Cave 3Q have never really been solved. The Copper Scroll seems to contain a list of treasure, and is the kind of find that Indiana Jones could have used to track down vast amounts of gold and silver ingots. Its very substance – fine copper – indicates that the people who hid this ‘document’ were wealthy. But not a single piece of treasure from the Copper Scroll has ever been located. Scholars ask many questions. Was this treasure ever hidden, or is this a kind of fantasy? If treasure was hidden, when did this hiding take place? And what kind of treasure was it?

The Copper Scroll was discovered in the cave explorations done jointly by the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Palestine Archaeological Museum and the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française in 1952. It was found by a team headed by Henri de Contenson in a cave north of the site of Qumran, in the north-western region of the Dead Sea. Known as 3Q (the third cave found with manuscripts in it [3], close to the site of Qumran [Q]) this cave otherwise contained fragments of parchment and papyrus manuscripts, over 30 broken cylindrical jars, over 20 lids, two jugs and a lamp.¹ However, it is the Copper Scroll that is the most extraordinary find. It is actually not one scroll, but two rolls made of fine copper, which were found one on top of the other at the back of the front chamber of the cave. [picture] It was opened in the Manchester Institute of Technology, through the agency of John Allegro, in October 1953, and was immediately sensational, in that it appears to be a list of buried treasure.

¹ Roland De Vaux, “Exploration de la Région de Qumran,” *Revue Biblique* 60 (1953), 540-61; Maurice Baillet, Józef T. Milik and Roland de Vaux, *Les “Petites Grottes”* (DJD 3; Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 7-8, 201.

See for the cutting open of the rolls <https://dqcaas.com/2016/11/24/1953-film-of-cutting-open-of-the-copper-scroll/>

It now exists in the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman in [picture] cut into 23 sections.

The treasure is vast, far beyond what we could imagine would be the property of an individual or even a group, unless they are the rulers of a nation. It is no wonder that a scholar such as John Allegro invested much effort trying to understand the precise locations of the treasure, searching for it.² If we look at the Copper Scroll closely in terms of its contents, this treasure seems to come from the/a Temple, treasure which was secreted away in 64 locations close to Jericho. The enormous size of the treasure indicates this, as well as the fact that there is cultic terminology (references to tithes, priestly vestments). But some scholars doubt that this could possibly be the Temple treasure, arguing instead that it relates to an Essene community who lived at Qumran.³ [panel on Essenes] Logistically, it is hard to imagine how this Temple treasure could have been buried in this area around the time of the First Revolt, before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and it is also hard to imagine how the ancient Jewish legal school of the Essenes – as envisaged -- could have played a part in hiding it. Therefore, it has even been suggested that it is not a real treasure.⁴

Here I would like to look not so much at the contents of the scroll as a literary work, or turn over the difficulties of its reading and interpretation, but rather think about what we know from the archaeology and history. To begin with, there is the actual substance of the artefact. The very high quality and expensive copper (99% copper, 1% tin), rather than the usual fine leather (parchment) of the scrolls, was light years beyond the means of most people. This writing surface is extremely unusual. If we look to comparative examples of writing on high-quality copper in antiquity, we only have tiny pieces, largely in the form of amulets, called *lamellae*, on which there was writing with a stylus on thin metal sheets that were then rolled up, placed in containers and worn around the neck.⁵ By contrast, in the

² John Allegro, *The Treasure of the Copper Scroll* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960).

³ Stephen Goranson, "Sectarianism, Geography and the Copper Scroll," *JJS* 43 (1992), 282-7.

⁴ Jozef T. Milik, "The Copper Document from Cave III, Qumran". *The Biblical Archaeologist* 19/3 (1956), 60–64; *id.* *DJD* 3, 199-302.

⁵ Such *lamellae* are widely known from the Mediterranean world, see R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper and Bronze Lamellae*, 1: *Published Texts of Known Provenance* (Papyrologica Coloniensia, 22/1; Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994). A number of these have been found in the region of Israel-Palestine and are of Jewish provenance. See Joseph Naveh and Saul Shaked, *Magic Spells*

Copper Scroll we have two copper rolls, about 8 feet long. The inscriptions on *lamellae* are designed to protect the wearer. The Copper Scroll contents are prescriptive: this is a list of hiding places, with no apparent prophylactic value.

The material of the scroll, however, should be a major consideration in its interpretation. One needs to ask why copper was preferable to parchment or papyrus. The most obvious answer is that writing on copper was intended to last. It could not be damaged by water and its high melting point (1083 Celsius, or 1981 Fahrenheit) means it could also survive some fires. So the substance of the writing material coheres with the contents of the work, in that it is an expensive treasure in itself, containing evidence of hiding places of treasure, and it is built to last. This implies that whatever crisis caused the hiding of the treasure, those who hid it had a fairly dismal view of their own survival. It is like a time capsule, made for the future.

As for the dating, the orthography (style of writing) is distinctive and the language is generally identified as an early form of Mishnaic Hebrew (mid-late 2nd cent. CE), with a number of Greek loanwords, and even mysterious Greek letter sequences that may, indeed, be designed to be protective in some way. Despite the Mishnaic style, most scholars follow the palaeography of Frank Moore Cross, who identified the script as coming from the mid-1st century, rather than William Albright, who identified this as lying between 70 and 135 CE.⁶ Many have suggested the Copper Scroll comes from just before the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE.⁷ However, Emile Puech, quite radically, has suggested instead it is

and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity. (Jerusalem, 1993); id.. *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem, 1998); Rivka Elitzur-Leiman, "Chapter 19. A Copper Amulet," in Uzi Leibner (ed.), *Khirbet Hammam: A Roman-period Village and Synagogue in the Lower Galilee* (Qedem Report 13: Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2018), 616-19; Hanan Eshel and Rivka Leiman, "Jewish Amulets Written on Metal Scrolls," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1: 200-210; M. Schwab, "Une Amulette judeo-arameenne," *JA* 7 (1906): 5-17; H. Vincent, "Amulette judeo-Arameenne," *RB* 5 (1908), 382-94; J. A. Montgomery, "Some Early Amulets from Palestine," *JAOS* 31 (1911), 272-81; A. Dupont-Sommer, "Deux lamelles d'argent a inscription hebreo-arameenne trouvees a Aḡabeyli (Turquie)," *Jahrbuch für Kleinasiatische Forschung* 1 (1950-51), 201-17; E. Testa, *L'huile de la foi: L'onction des maladies sur une lamelle du 1er siècle* (Publications du Studium Biblicum Franciscanum: Collectio minor 3; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967); F. Klein-Franke, "Eine aramaische Tabella devotionis," *ZPE* 7 (1971), 47-52.

⁶ See Al Wolters, "Literary Analysis and the *Copper Scroll*," in *Intertestamental Essays in Honour of Jozef Tadeusz Milik*, edited by Z. J. Kapera (Kraków: Enigma Press, 1992), 239-52.

⁷ Bargil Pixner, "Unravelling the *Copper Scroll* Case: A Study on the Topography of 3Q15," *Revue de Qumran* 11 (1983), 323-66.

treasure relating to disaffected Essene priests (the Teacher of Righteousness) in 152 CE.⁸ Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz⁹ and Manfred Lehmann¹⁰ have argued that the Copper Scroll must relate to the treasures relating to cultic activity in the Bar Kokhba period (Laperrousaz) or the temple tax collected between the years 70 and 135 CE (Lehmann). It is these latter suggestions about the Copper Scroll that are most intriguing to me.

Bar Kokhba – rightly Shimon Bar-Kosiba –¹¹ is himself a mystery. Little is known about him, but he led a Judaeen revolt against the Romans from c.130-135 CE, when his rebellion was quashed with enormous force. For this revolt, we have no Josephus, and therefore little evidence to form a historical narrative. It seems unrest was sparked by an announcement by the Roman Emperor Hadrian:¹² Dio Cassius (*Roman History* 69.12–14) states that when the Hadrian visited Judea en route from Egypt to Syria (in c. 129–130 C.E.), he ordered that a new temple to Jupiter Capitolinus should be constructed on the Temple Mount and that Jerusalem should be rebuilt as a Roman colony, Aelia Capitolina, Latin for “The City of the Capitoline Gods.” The resulting Judean revolt was widespread, but the results were catastrophic. Dio Cassius records that the Romans sent their best generals and massive numbers of troops, and soon 50 of the secret outposts of the rebels¹³ were destroyed, 985 towns and villages were razed, 580,000 Judean fighting men were killed in battle and countless numbers of people died from starvation, disease and the burning of the towns and villages: “So, almost all of Judea was turned into a wilderness.”¹⁴ [panel: Lamentations Rabba]

⁸ Emile Puech, *The Copper Scroll Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁹ Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz, “Remarques sur l’origine des rouleaux de cuivre decouverts dans la grotte 3 de Qumran,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 159 (1961), 157-72.

¹⁰ M. R. Lehmann, “Identification of the *Copper Scroll* Based on Its Technical Terms.” *RQ* 5 (1964): 97-105.

Lehmann, M. R., “Where the Temple Tax Was Buried: The Key to Understanding the Copper Scroll.” *BAR* 19 (Nov./Dec. 1993): 38.

¹¹ See Hanan Eshel, “The Bar Kochba Revolt, 132–135 CE,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 105–127.

¹² See Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 69:12:1, cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccles.* 4:6:1,3, Ep. Barnabas 16:4.

¹³ Many of these have been found, see Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu, “Hiding Complexes in Judaea: An Archaeological and Geographical Update on the Area of the Bar Kochba Revolt,” in *The Bar Kokhba Revolt Reconsidered*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 181–216, at pp. 181–182. We now know of over 125 subterranean hiding settlement-complexes in the Shephalah, Hebron mountains and Bethel region.

¹⁴ *History of Rome* 69:14:2.

Refugees fled to caves over the area of the western Dead Sea coast, where well-preserved archaeological artefacts have been discovered, including – famously – those of the Cave of Letters (picture/caption). In my view, the Copper Scroll coheres with what we know of the devastation following the Bar Kokhba revolt, when those in charge of the ongoing cult --- the High Priesthood and the chief priests – sought to hide what they could of what was in reality the state treasury as much as Judean cultic funds, assuming rightly that the most horrendous circumstances would prevail.

But was there a functioning Temple of some kind at the time of Bar Kokhba? It is unlikely, in view of evidence that does exist, that Bar Kokhba restored the Temple proper in Jerusalem. However, a deep love of the Temple, and the desire to rebuild it, is clearly advertised in the Bar Kokhba coinage that shows the façade of the Temple sanctuary [picture].¹⁵ From coins, we also learn that a Temple administration existed under a high priest named Eleazar.¹⁶ In the Mishnah, there is mention of a “court of priests,”¹⁷ but it is not clear where it is.¹⁸ As Lehmann has noted, it is not necessary to have a functioning Temple building in Jerusalem for there to be Temple treasure, because some form of cult could continue without a building. If your synagogue or church is destroyed, it doesn’t mean you give up on worship and religious practice. Lehmann has argued that this treasure may never have been in Jerusalem, but rather stored up in various safe localities over some time. I have previously noted how Josephus describes everything to do with the Temple cult and Jewish law as still functioning through to the 90s of the first century, even though the Temple was destroyed.¹⁹ Josephus, while always referring in the past tense to the Temple as a building, refers to the continuation of sacrifices in the present (e.g., *Apion* 2.193–198).

Historically, there have always been problems in ascribing the Copper Scroll to the time of the First Revolt and the Jerusalem Temple. It is often thought that the Dead Sea Scrolls were taken from a library area in or around Qumran itself and placed in caves along

¹⁵ See Leo Mildenberg, *The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War*, ed. Patricia Erhart Mottahedeh, Typos: Monographien zur antiken Numismatik 6 (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1984).

¹⁶ See *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, revised edition, ed. Emil Schürer with Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), vol. 1, p. 544.

¹⁷ Mishnah *Ketubbot* 1:5

¹⁸ Philip Alexander, “What Happened to the Jewish Priesthood after 70?” in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Sean Freyne*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers with M. Daly-Denton and A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley, JSJ Supplements 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 3–34, at 29–30.

¹⁹ Joan E. Taylor, “Parting in Palestine,” in *Partings: How Judaism and Christianity Became Two*, edited by Hershel Shanks (Washington: BAR, 2013).

the mountain ridge in order to hide them in advance of a threat, namely the arrival of the Roman army in Jericho and its surrounding area in 68 CE. The historian Josephus describes the arrival of Vespasian's army in Jericho and the northern Dead Sea (*War* 4: 483-50), and the site of Qumran was clearly destroyed at this point, as verified by evidence of Roman arrow heads and burning. I have suggested that the extant scrolls comprise the remainder of a large cache buried in the caves around Qumran over a long period of time before 68 CE, placed there by Essenes who lived at Qumran, reflecting their very high esteem for "ancient writings" (*War* 2: 136, cf. *War* 2: 159; *Ant.* 13: 311).²⁰ At any rate, given that Qumran and the region of Jericho fell to the Romans prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, then the area was held by the Romans at the very time the Temple treasure of the Copper Scroll was supposed to have been hidden. The city of Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans, who apparently carried off and exhibited in an extravagant public procession what they understood to be the Temple treasure (*War* 6: 282; 7: 148), some of this being displayed until today on the Arch of Titus in Rome.²¹ If part of the Temple treasure was secreted away before the siege we would have to imagine a situation in which people journeyed a long way with a heavy load of extremely valuable goods²² - on very dangerous roads - in order to then hide these goods (sadly in the path of an oncoming army), and that no one responsible for any of our literary sources (most importantly Josephus) knew about this. That wealthy people of Jerusalem could not get their goods out of the city is indicated in what Josephus states in *War* 7: 114-115: after the war the Roman soldiers and Jewish captives managed to dig up gold, silver and precious furniture which the desperate owners had buried underground *in the city*. And the treasure seized by the Romans from the Temple was so vast it furnished the Temple of Peace in Rome, and continued to be known about (and transferred around) for centuries to come.²³

In terms of the archaeology of Cave 3Q ASOR scholar William Reed stated definitively in his report on the discovery of the Copper Scroll that '[t]he date of the pottery with which they were associated, and the similarity of several small pieces of inscribed parchment in Cave 3Q to the Dead Sea Scrolls make it certain that the rolls were placed on

²⁰ Joan E. Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

²¹ See for a critique of the "Jerusalem Temple treasure" hypothesis, Stephen Goranson, "Sectarianism, Geography and the Copper Scroll" *JJS* 43 (1992) 282-7, at p.285.

²² Up to nine hundred talents (3Q15 I:8)!

²³ See Sean Kingsley, *God's Gold: A Quest for the Lost Temple Treasures of Jerusalem* (London: John Murray, 2006).

the floor of the cave prior to 70 A.D.²⁴ According to Reed, who relied on what Henri de Contenson told him, the two rolls were found on the floor, without a container, one of top of the other, as if the owners intended to return for them. The cave was ‘apparently closed by a severe earthquake shortly after the rolls were placed in it’.²⁵

But do we know for sure that the Copper Scroll should be dated by its association with other artefacts in the cave? Sequences of deposits in caves are often difficult to understand, because caves do not usually have much of a stratigraphy, though earthquake falls do provide some perspectives. Cave 3Q was a large, long, cave, but the inner chamber had collapsed, leaving only a cavity 3 m. by 2 m. prolonged by a straight ascending gallery. The Copper Scroll was found near the entrance to the inner, collapsed chamber, against rocky walls which formed its base, part from the other finds in the cave. The two rolls of the Copper Scroll were isolated into a kind of niche.²⁶ Cave 3Q once contained other texts, but these were taken away long ago leaving only fragments indicating their existence. We simply do not know whether the Copper Scroll and the jars, lids and manuscripts were deposited at exactly the same time.

The collapse of the inner part of the cave was probably caused by an earthquake. In 1986 a team headed by Joseph Patrich re-excavated Cave 3Q.²⁷ Most importantly it was noted that the cave had suffered collapse even before anything was placed in it. Patrich’s team moved stones and boulders to check if any sherds were located under these in the inner chamber, and found none. However, when the explorers of 1952 found Cave 3Q, the way into the cave was sealed shut with blocks of stone, though potsherds that had fallen from the entrance gave a clue to the archaeological team that they should break through this sealing to enter the cave.²⁸ The initial team found sherds *under* the entrance blocks as well as outside, which means that rockfall occurred when the cave entrance was open enough for broken pottery to fall into it, with stones on top.

²⁴ William L. Reed, “The Qumran Caves Expedition of March, 1952,” *BASOR* 135 (Oct., 1954), 8- 13, at p.10.

²⁵ Reed, “Qumran Caves”, 12.

²⁶ Roland de Vaux, “Exploration de la Région de Qumran”, *RB* 60 (1953), 540-61 at 555, 557.

²⁷ Joseph Patrich, “Khirbet Qumran in Light of New Archaeological Explorations in the Qumran Caves,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*. ed. Michael O. Wise, Norman Golb, John J. Collins, and Dennis G. Pardee (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 722. New York: New York Academy of Sciences. 5, 1994), 73-95, at p.77.

²⁸ “Its mouth had been blocked and the Bedouin did not know of its existence”, De Vaux, *ADSS*, p.95; id. “Exploration,” 555.

So there were at least two rockfalls, one before anything was deposited, and at least one after, and the latter one(s) broke the jars. But earthquakes can open and close entrances to caves over the centuries many times. We don't really know how many times the entrance could have been blocked up (by humans or earthquakes) and opened again. If manuscripts (in jars, with lids) were placed in 3Q before 68 CE we could still have had access to the cave if it was either the entrance was not fully blocked or the entrance was left open, or if an earthquake had opened the blocked entrance to the cave. Following the year 70 CE, the first strong earthquake to be recorded was around the years 113-115 CE, prior to the Bar Kokhba revolt in 130 CE.²⁹ If the entrance was blocked after the deposit of the jars (with manuscripts) prior to 68 CE, it could well have been open after this earthquake. As mentioned above, we know of many other caves in the vicinity where Bar Kokhba refugees hid from the Romans; they even encamped at Qumran.³⁰ Strangely, an early newspaper report tantalisingly states that the Copper Scroll was found with Bar Kochba coins,³¹ but these were never mentioned again.

Emile Puech has suggested that the Copper Scroll is detached from the jars and was deposited before them in the cave.³² But the date he suggests of 152 CE is long before the site of Qumran or anywhere else along the Dead Sea coast was in fact occupied by the Hasmoneans, let alone the Essenes, and there is no other parallel for cave deposits at this time. Rather, there is considerable evidence for cave deposits in this area at the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Thus the archaeology would suggest that the Temple treasure here might very well derive from this period, as Laperrousaz and Luria have argued.³³ The Copper Scroll

²⁹ Taylor, *Essenes, Scrolls and Dead Sea*, 265.

³⁰ Joan E. Taylor, "The Qumran Caves in their Regional Context: A Chronological Review with a Focus on Bar Kokhba Assemblages," in Marcello Fidanzio (ed.), *The Caves of Qumran: Proceedings of the International Conference, Lugano 2014* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 7-33.

³¹ Report in the *New York Times*, Tuesday, April 1st, 1952, less than 2 weeks after the discovery. This article was based on the report by the Religious News Service from Jerusalem, March 31, 1952 and appeared on p.13, col. 6, see Judah Lefkovits, "The Copper Scroll-3Q15: A New Reading, Translation and Commentary," New York University Ph.D., 3. De Vaux was not present at the time the Copper Scroll was found. **Lefkovits book!** However, de Vaux later indicated that no coins were found in any of the caves, "Exploration," 553.

³² Puech, *Copper Scroll Revisited*, 1-17.

³³ Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz, "Remarques sur l'origine des rouleaux de cuivre decouverts dans la grotte 3 de Qumran," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 159 (1961), 157-72; Ben-Zion Luria, *The Copper Scroll from the Desert of Judah* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1963). (Heb.)

would then be associated with the people who briefly occupied Qumran and the region c.135 CE, after the site was left derelict.³⁴

What became of them, or the treasure, may forever be unknown.

³⁴ Finds from the Bar Kokhba period have been found in several caves proximate to Qumran, though de Vaux did not document them in his preliminary reports.